

But Not Through Me Curriculum

The Trinity Forum

A Brush With Evil

There wasn't much time. She was hungry, but her flight would be boarding soon. Sometimes flights just worked out so that you got nothing to eat all day, and she really wanted something. As luck would have it, there was a small place open near her gate. She stood in line and bought a bag of chips and a diet cola.

But all the tables in the small airport cafeteria were full. There was not a single free table. She'd have to share with somebody who already had one.

She spotted a likely prospect: a reasonably well dressed man sitting by himself at a small table, reading a paper. Certainly he would not mind if she sat at one of the empty seats at his table and quietly ate her snack.

She sat down. They briefly made eye contact; he seemed to nod slightly and then went back to his paper. She was nervous for no apparent reason. She busied herself with her snack. She set down her diet cola, unwrapped the straw, inserted it in the slot, and had her first sip. Then another. Then she had a chip.

When her mouth crunched on the first chip, the man suddenly looked up from his newspaper. He looked angry, intent, alert, vaguely dangerous. He fixed his eyes on hers, violent, like a predator seeing prey. And then, amazingly, he slowly reached out his hand into her bag of chips, extracted one, brought it to his mouth, and ate it!

Her heart began to beat rapidly. A crazy impulse told her to flee, abandon her food to this man and save herself. She took another drink and then made herself take another chip from her bag and eat it. He glared at her, motionless. It was a hostile, evil glare. What had at first struck her as a calm, middle-aged gentleman now appeared as a dangerous individual, capable of unknown things. As she finished chewing her chip, he reached out and took another himself. Now she knew he was not just helping himself one time, as if to say she owed him a chip for sitting at his table. Now he was totally outside the bounds of normal etiquette between strangers. What sort of person was this?

They finished the bag, not speaking a single word but intently taking turns drawing chips. He looked at her the whole time; she didn't know whether to meet his gaze or to look away, so she alternated. She took big gulps of her drink. Soon it was nearly gone and the bag was nearly empty, too. She had had enough. She stood up, nodded, looked away from him, picked up her bags, and walked quickly out of the place. She got to her gate a few minutes early and sat in the waiting area, heart pounding, still unable to grasp what had just happened, what manner of creature she had just encountered. What sort of people just help themselves to a stranger's food in a restaurant?

She learned the answer sooner than she expected. They called passengers to board the plane, and she got right in line. When she came to the front of the line, she reached into her bag for her ticket. It was there, and next to it was her bag of chips. Somehow, when she paid for the snack, she had put her chips into her flight bag, and at the table she and the mysterious stranger had shared his chips, not hers. She herself was the sort of person who just helped herself to a stranger's food in a restaurant. . . .

What sort of people just help themselves to a stranger's food in a restaurant? She learned the answer sooner than she expected.

Had you asked the woman if she would ever take a stranger's food in an airport restaurant, she probably would have said no. The same response is likely to be elicited by almost any hypothetical question about evil. Would you obey orders to kill innocent civilians? Would you help torture someone? Would you stand by passively while the secret police hauled your neighbors off to concentration camps? Most people say no. But when such events actually happen, the reality is quite different.

Understanding evil begins with the realization that we ourselves are capable of doing many of these things. Ordinary, normal people have done a great many evil things, and some times the majority of those present have acquiesced. To understand evil, we must set aside the comfortable belief that we would never do anything wrong. Instead, we must begin to ask ourselves, what would it take for *me* to do such things? Assume that it would be possible.

—Roy F. Baumeister

From Roy F. Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1996).

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